

Reasonable And Radical Transformation

Text: Romans 12:1-2

Series: Book of Romans [#15]

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Theme: **God's Great Salvation Calls For Your Transformation.**

Introduction

Today as we move into Romans 12 in our ongoing look at the book of Romans, we are thinking about a *Reasonable and Radical Transformation*. That might sound like an oxymoron. The terms *reasonable* and *radical* seem contradictory. It's a bit like the phrase "the silence is deafening", or, "an honest thief." On the lighter side, there are some who think that "an interesting Canadian election" is an oxymoron.

This reasonable and radical transformation might appear to be an oxymoron, but it is not. The transformation the apostle Paul writes about in the first two verses of this chapter is both reasonable and radical.

In the first eleven chapters he has focused primarily on the great truths of the gospel. Now his primary focus shifts to what kind of people we should be in light of these truths. At times we may want to make a straight line to the practical implications, to *what this means to me*, without looking carefully into the truth that is the foundation and power for answering our questions and living as we should. Paul's order of development in this letter reminds us of how important it is to work through the powerful, foundational truths and to keep them before us as we consider how we, as God's redeemed people, should now live.

The big picture of these two verses is that *God's great salvation calls for your transformation*. Let's start with the reasonable part. Paul's directive to us is ...

A Reasonable Request.

Why? First, because of God's mercy to us. Paul writes, "Therefore, I urge you brethren by the mercies of God ..." (1a). God's mercy is His love in action. It is His compassion to us who are needy, desperately needy. Jesus healed people who called out to Him for mercy.

- People such as the two blind men who "followed Him, crying out, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David.'" In mercy Jesus touched their eyes and they were healed, they were able to see (Matthew 9:27-31).
- People such as the Canaanite woman who cried out to Him, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon possessed." In mercy Jesus spoke "and her daughter was healed at once" (Matthew 15:21-28).

Here in Romans, Paul summed up his teaching about Israel by directing us to God's mercy. We saw this at the end of the last chapter. Turn back to verse 30 in chapter 11.

“For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.” (30-32)

More than this, Paul is asking us to consider all the mercies of God in our salvation that has been his subject from the start of the letter. He repeatedly reminds us in his letters that God’s gift of salvation to us as helpless sinners flows from His mercy. In those beautiful and grand words in the second chapter of Ephesians,

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” (4-7).

We deserved justice. God gave us mercy. Paul is appealing to us, “Think of all God’s mercy to you! In light of that, God’s call upon your life is reasonable!”

It is also reasonable because what God asks of you He also asks of each and every other believer. He says, “I urge you, *brethren*.” Not, “I urge you who are missionaries.” Nor, “I urge you who are pastors and elders.” Nor yet, “I urge you who have been believers for a long time.” But, “I urge *all of you, each and every one of you*.”

From one perspective no one is left out or excluded. From another, we all are in this together. This means we can share with and encourage each other. Paul uses the phrase “one another” in a positive sense at least thirty-seven times in his letters, twelve times here in Romans. Look ahead in this chapter.

- Verse 5. “... we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members *one of another*.”
- Go to verse 10. “Be devoted to *one another* in brotherly love; give preference to *one another* in honor.”
- Drop down to verse 16. “Be of the same mind toward *one another*; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.”

While Paul speaks to us as individuals, each of us being responsible to submit to Christ and allow Him to transform us, there is the need, there are opportunities for us to encourage, challenge and help each other.

Now let’s move on from the *reasonable request* to the *radical process* of this transformation.

A Radical Process.

Here we begin to zoom in on the what the reasonable request is. It is a call for radical transformation. This process starts by presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice. Verse 1.

“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”

Think about this sacrifice. Sacrifices were standard in worship for both Jews and Gentiles at that time. When the believers in Rome read or heard this phrase, they would quickly form a picture in their minds based on their experiences. You and I are to present our bodies as a sacrifice to God. Paul is referring to our physical bodies, but also to our total being including both our inner motives and thoughts and our outer words and actions.

He describes this sacrifice with three words. The first one is *living*. As the first readers and we also know, a living animal brought for sacrifice was killed in the process. In contrast to that, when we sacrifice ourselves to God we keep on living. And all of our living, all of our life now is to be a sacrifice offered to Him. The animal sacrifices were offered to cover or atone for sin, but the sacrifice of ourselves is a response to the great mercy we have received from God in Christ.

The second word is *holy*. The primary meaning of holy is to be set apart for, to be dedicated to God. And so it includes being separated from sin and dedicated to the perfect character and standards of God, similar to the sacrificial animals being free from blemishes or defects. The basic sense is front and center here. I am to present myself to God as set apart from my own purposes and everything else and as set apart to God, to His purposes, to His plans, to His directions.

The last description is *acceptable*. This is an overall summary of our sacrifice. It is to be acceptable to God in every way. Paul uses the same word in verse 2 in relationship to God’s will being “acceptable”, and later in 14:18 about serving Christ in an acceptable way. In 2 Corinthians 5:9 he wrote that whether here on earth or with Christ in heaven his ambition was to be approved by or pleasing to God. That is to be our ambition as well. Just as God did not accept blind, lame and sick animals as sacrifices at the Tabernacle and then the Temple¹, so He does not accept the sacrifice of ourselves if it is partial, if it is qualified, or if we keep holding on to sin.

Paul tells us this kind of sacrifice is our “spiritual service of worship.” Our English translations vary a bit here simply because of the words Paul used under God’s direction. The first word came from the term for word, thinking and reason. It can have the idea of being *reasonable*. And so we can understand the King James Version’s, “your *reasonable* service.” While this word came to refer to *spiritual* in the sense of true inner worship, not just external acts, but it kept the aspect of being rational and so, reasonable. The second word, *worship*, had the original idea of service. So, once again, the King James Version’s “your *reasonable service*” is a good rendering.

As well, we should note the force of this command. Paul's direction to *present* our bodies is a command. It's form varies from the commands in verse two in its tense, and there are a number of different views about the kind of action it describes. That is largely due to this tense being the most flexible or, as it has been described, the most "plastic"² of the tenses in the language of the New Testament, and so the range of options. It seems best to me to take this a summary command, everything that follows flowing from it. It is a command which sums up the entire matter of giving ourselves to God and being transformed.

This may seem reasonable, but it also may sound difficult. We need to understand our position as the people of God. In Deuteronomy 15 God gave instructions about how the people were to relate to their own people who were their slaves, usually because of financial necessity. God said those slaves were to be given their freedom in the seventh year. However, a slave could choose to stay with his master if two conditions were met:

- first, if he loved his master;
- then second, if his master had treated him well.

If he chose to stay, that was an irrevocable choice. He was to be taken to a door post, an awl placed up to his ear and driven through it to indicate he was then a slave to that master for the rest of his life.

In a way that is similar to our position with God. He has bought us with the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. He has treated us well, showering us with His mercy and grace. The question is, "Do I really love Him? Am I willing to serve Him with all my life for the rest of my life?"

Having dealt with this foundational aspect of this radical process, Paul continues with what it means with respect to the world in which we live. We are to swim upstream in a downstream world. Verse 2 gets us into some of the specific ways in which we are to present ourselves as sacrifices to God. Paul begins with "do not be conformed to this world." You may know J. B. Phillips paraphrase, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould."³

"This world" literally is "this age." It refers to Satan's reign of darkness and sin, of opposition to God and His people.⁴ When we came to Christ He freed us from that. We are now free to serve God. We now are those who overcome this world.⁵ So why would we want to, why would we even allow ourselves to continue to be shaped, fashioned by the powers and values that are opposed not only to God, but also to us? It doesn't make any sense! Paul says, "Don't let this world to continue to shape you any longer! Not today! Not ever!"

John Bode wrote,

"O let me feel Thee [God] near me, the world is ever near. I see the sights that dazzle, the tempting sounds I hear: my foes are ever near me, around me and within. But Jesus, draw Thou nearer, and shield my soul from sin."⁶

We face that every day in every aspect of life.

This is an ongoing battle and process because while now we are not of this world, we still are in it. While we are freed from its rule, Satan's forces still attack and there is that sin which dwells in us. So, just as the fish returning to their spawning grounds exert great effort to swim upstream, so we, by God's power and grace, are to swim upstream in our downstream world.

A veteran of the U.S. Navy SEALs described the color-code system they use to indicate levels of combat readiness.

- Condition White: The soldier is relaxed and daydreaming, unaware of his surroundings.
- Condition Yellow: The soldier is relaxed physically but alert mentally.
- Condition Orange: The soldier is physically prepared, mentally alert, and ready to fight.
- Condition Red: As in condition orange, the soldier is ready to fight. The difference is experience.⁷

Every believer, each one of us, need to be alert every moment of every day. What is the level of your *spiritual* combat readiness?

There is one more factor in this radical process—continually allowing God to renew your mind. Paul tells us not to be conformed to this world, “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (2b). There is a life-long battle for what we think, do and are, and it is waged in our mind. We know and we have shared Paul's struggle described in chapter 7—not doing what we want to and doing what we hate (7:15 f.). The sin that dwells within us and Satan's forces wage war in our minds to keep us captive to darkened, sinful and futile thinking.⁶ Remember Proverbs 23:7, “as he thinks within himself, so he is.”

The transformation, the metamorphosis of us developing the character and conduct of Christ is a life-long process. Paul described this in 2 Corinthians 3:18.

“We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

In Ephesians 4 he tells us to

“...lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.” (22-24)

In Colossians 3 he writes about our new nature in Christ, "...the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him." (10)

But how does this take place? What do we need to do to allow God to renew our mind and transform us? Jesus has told us. He has given us the key, indispensable element. He prayed for the disciples and all who would believe in Him through the gospel, including us, that the Father would "sanctify them in the truth." He went on, "*Your word is truth*" (John 17:17). Yes, it is the same song, and even the same verse we hear so often! God transforms us by renewing our minds through the truth of Scripture.

God's word "*is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword,*" it *does* "[pierce] as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and" it *is* "able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). We must be reading, thinking about, living God's word to have the Holy Spirit take that truth and renew our minds with it, and so then, radically transform us.

God's great salvation calls for your transformation. We're not quite finished, for after this reasonable request and radical process, Paul shares with us ...

A Radical Result.

Look at verse two once more.

"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, *so that* [here's the radical result] you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

When we respond to God's reasonable request and follow His radical process, we will see, we will approve, love and live by His will.

This word "prove" means to test and prove to be true and then, as the result of that test, to approve. It also leads to acting on, using what was approved. When, for example, gold was tested for quality, this word was used for proving the quality and then approving and using that gold. The result of this radical transformation is being able to personally see, prove and move forward in God's will, that is, the things that are good, acceptable and perfect.

When we think, talk about and pray for God's will, our focus easily can be on wanting specific answers and directions (and sometimes we want these very quickly!). It is natural to focus on the answers we need and want. But here there is something different. It is a focus on and process for *becoming the people* who, by God's grace, can see and live God's will. *Don't miss this!*

Here God gives us a focus on and a process for becoming radically transformed people who, by His grace, can see and live His will as we move through life.

God supplies wisdom to us when we ask in faith and He works great things through the prayers of the righteous.⁷ Solid trusting faith as well as righteous character and living are not isolated qualities or moments. They are the result of being radically transformed by God.

Now this is radical! There is no way you and I can have this insight and discernment on our own, even with the most sincere and disciplined efforts.

Conclusion.

God's great salvation calls for your transformation. How is it going for you? Are you following God's radical process? What transformation do you see in your life? On a scale of one to ten, where do you see yourself in being conformed to this world? Then, again on a scale of one to ten, where are you in being transformed by the renewing of your mind?

If you are at all like most of the rest of us, there may be a little, or even a lot of fear about this? "What will God ask me to do? If I do this, if I present all of myself to God as a living sacrifice, what will other people think of me? Will they think I am some kind of a religious nut?"

There is an old story told about a Persian General who had a strange custom for captured spies and others who were sentenced to death. He allowed them a choice: they could face a firing squad in his courtyard, or they could walk through the big, black door at the back of the courtyard. Time after time the condemned would choose a firing squad and die in a volley of bullets.

One day after another execution the General told an aide, "You see how it is with men: they always prefer the known to the unknown. It is characteristic of people to be afraid of the undefined. And yet we gave them a choice." His aide asked, "What is on the other side of the big black door?" "Freedom," the General answered, "and I've only known a few men brave enough to take it."⁸

Is fear holding you back from presenting yourself as a living sacrifice to God and following His path to being radically transformed? You have a tremendous advantage over those condemned prisoners in the story. You know what lies beyond the door of your fear: radical transformation to be more and more like Jesus Christ. Always remember that Christ "gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Galatians 1:4).

As you think about these truths with God now, thank Him for His great mercy and grace to you. Thank Him for your salvation. Out of your thankfulness make the choice, or renew your choice to present yourself as a living, holy, acceptable sacrifice to God, to go upstream in this downstream world, to have your mind renewed—to be radically transformed.

¹ Leviticus 22:17-22; Deuteronomy 15:21; Malachi 1:8.

² D. A. Carson. *Exegetical Fallacies* (Second Edition). Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996, p. 71.

³ J. B. Phillips. *The New Testament In Modern English*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2004.

⁴ e.g., John 12:31; 15:20; 2 Corinthians 4:4.

⁵ e.g., Romans 5:17, 21; 6:14, 22; 1 John 5:4.

⁶ John Ernest Bode. *O Jesus, I Have Promised*. Public Domain.

⁷ Author Unknown. Source: <http://www.preceptaustin.org/ephesians_sermon_illustrations_6.htm>. Accessed 11 February 2010.

⁸ 1:27; Ephesians 1:18; 4:17.

⁹ James 1:6; 5:16.

¹⁰ Original source unknown. Frequently cited for many years, e.g.,
<<http://sermoncentral.com/Illustrations/SearchResults.asp?keyword=Lies>>
<<http://www.preaching.com/resources/articles/11548169/>>
etc. These two sites accessed 12 February 2010.

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